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THE HIMALAYAS

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M. S. RANDHAWA

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INTRODUCTION BY

M. S. RANDHAWA.

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THE ART OF BIRESWAR SEN

" Have you any pictures of the Himalayas to show me, Mr. Sen ?" said I on entering the work room of the Head Master of the Government Art School at Lucknow. Under a glass cover on the wall opposite was a beautiful painting showing a snow-covered Himalayan peak with a solitary Tibetan Lama draped in crimson red robes in the foreground. The turquoise blue sky, with deft touches of white in a corner depicting a cirrus cloud, and the glistening white colour of the snow could hardly fail to move a lover of mountains. Sen directed me to the glass case. "The Eternal Quest", the name he had given to this picture was a pastel sketch. "This is a pastel sketch, beautiful, but of transitory interest, and likely to be erased if the glass cover breaks accidentally. It is of little use to a nomad like me who has to pack up his belongings every second year on transfer to a new station" said I. "Youth and beauty are also transitory" Sen replied. "I find pastels more congenial, and they are a swifter medium to capture the subtle flashes of beauty which occur to me at odd moments unexpectedly. Nonetheless, I have a few water colours at my house, which I can show you, if you would care to wait for a few minutes". I spent some time scanning the water colours of Sen's students, displayed under glass-cases on the walls of the room. Sen was giving finishing touches to a miniature landscape. He was lost in his work, and it was interesting to watch him create sun-lit landscapes of great beauty, which have given happiness to so many. A dapper little man with a bulging forehead, twinkling grey eyes, a sensitive mouth, and a prominent chin, he gave an impression of efficiency, neatness and precision, which are reflected in the perfect line work of his pictures.

After he had locked his miniatures in a drawer, we walked to his house, which is close to the school building. We entered by a small gate made out of the interlacing branches of the thorny shrub, *Inga dulcis*, which had been allowed to grow into a beautiful wall of dark green. In front of the verandah was a *Bauhinia* tree laden with fragrant sweet-scented pinkish flowers, which had attracted a swarm of bees. We entered a small room, decorated with the pictures of Abanindra Nath Tagore, Sarada Ukil, and other Bengali artists. On one side was a portrait of Rabindra Nath Tagore, in which the curls of his flowing hair, his patriarchal beard, and his kindly eyes were so realistically portrayed. On a book case was a portrait of his blue-eyed daughter Manta. On the mantlepiece were some Nepalese bronzes and soap stone sculptures of

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Mahapatra, showing the grace of Indian womanhood in exquisite curves. We soon made ourselves at home, and after chewing some betel-leaves which Manta offered us, we were ready to examine the pictures. Sen produced about a dozen water-colours of the Himalayas. Of those, four or five pictures were of outstanding merit. It was a discovery for me to find an Indian artist painting the mountains of his country in their charming colours. In a picture entitled "Purple and Gold" he had depicted the after-glow of the setting sun, gold tipped snow peaks, purple mountains, floating golden clouds, and a plateau with a sombre oak forest. In this picture, he has even improved upon nature, and transferred on paper the artist's vision of beauty in glowing colours. The other picture, which he had entitled "The Pilgrims", showed the famous Badrinath Peak. The diminutive figures of the pilgrims, draped in orange robes, wending their weary way on a craggy bridle-path, the snow peaks transformed into a pile of gold by the rays of the setting sun, the greyish green glacial stream, the stippled light on the birch trees—all together made a beautiful picture.

These pictures stimulated my interest in Bireswar and his art, and I asked him about his early training. I learnt that he was born in Calcutta on November 15, 1897, where his family had settled down in the beginning of the nineteenth century. His grand-father Jugneswar Sen was a Solicitor of the Calcutta High Court. His father, Saileswar Sen, who had a brilliant academic career in the Calcutta University, worked as a Professor of English literature in the Calcutta University, and later on as Principal, Commercial College, Delhi. He had a fine taste in painting and possessed a good collection of books on world's best paintings. Bireswar Sen's earliest excursions in art were connected with his water colour box, and he took great delight in colouring the illustrations of his text-books. His grand-father also took interest in his artistic tendencies, and fostered them by giving him beautifully illustrated books and painting materials. He used to accompany his grand-father to the exhibitions of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta. He was greatly inspired by the coloured reproductions of the pictures of Abanindra Nath Tagore and Nand Lal Bose in the Modern Review. In 1918 he came into contact with Abanindra Nath Tagore and Nand Lal Bose, when he was studying for his B.A. (Hons.) examination. In 1921, he passed his M.A. examination in English with a first class, and in 1923 he joined the Bihar National College, Patna, as professor of English —a post which he gave up in 1929 to join the Government School of Arts and Crafts, Lucknow.

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Sen has a knack of selecting sparkling pithy names for the titles of his pictures. His deep knowledge of English language explains the happy choice of words which he makes in coining names. He is widely read, and maintains one of the finest private libraries on the art of painting. Apart from painting, he has written extensively on art. He has little respect for the juggleries of Cubism, Surrealism, and other distortions of the so-called modern art. Out of the moderns, he greatly admires the vigorous paintings of the Mexicans, Diego Rivera, and Orozco, and he has great respect for the Russian painter, Roerich, who has influenced his art. For the so-called "Bengal School of Art", which has arrogated to itself the title of "Indian Art" by its peculiarly distorted human figures and slanting wide-open eyes, which are meant to arouse romantic tremors in the beholder or excite mystical feelings by the half-closed eyes of mediaeval deities, he has little admiration. As there is no "Indian Science" different from "World Science", for the concept of truth is the same all the world over, so also "Indian Art" is not something radically different from art in other countries, though it has some local peculiarities, for the concept of beauty is universal. Imperfect workmanship, poor line work, and un-understanding use of colours cannot create beauty and cannot escape the stigma of inferiority and take shelter under the cloak of nationalism to conceal its shortcomings.

Talking to Bireswar is a most stimulating experience. Once you arouse his interest, he will keep you fascinated for hours, enlivening the conversation with his scintillating wit and rapier-like thrusts of satire.

AS A FIGURE PAINTER

In his juvenile period as an artist, he was a figure painter. We find him painting beautiful women in 1923, as in the "Milk-maid", "Dawn", and "Blackberries". For a time he came under the influence of Edmund Dulac, and we see him painting Turkish beauties with narrow waists and baggy trousers, as in the picture called "The Scribe". It was fashionable to paint Moghul emperors like Shah Jehan and Akbar, and we find him painting the Mughul prince in the picture called "Meditation". These pictures with their primness and severity of lines appear artificial. Obviously, the role of the Moghul courtier was ill-suited to the rebel and the idealist in Bireswar, and, fortunately he soon discarded these inanities.

Fairly early we find trees and mountains creeping in his pictures. In the "Toilet", against a background of a twisted tree and a dark shape-

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less mountain, we see a beautiful Bengali woman holding a mirror sitting on a "Chouki" getting her hair combed by a maid servant. We notice a gradual simplification of setting in his pictures. 'Damayanti', a woman draped in tattered red garments, sitting on a mound against a background of mast-like trunks of sal trees, shows this tendency unmistakably. Gradually, his figures became smaller and smaller, and nature began to wield her sway. In 1932, he visited Naggar, the abode of Nicholas Roerich, the famous Russian artist in the Kulu Valley in the Himalayas. This contact followed by a visit to Kashmir, decided once for all the future of his art, and the influence of the Himalayas became paramount in his soul. He devoted his ripening talents exclusively to the glory of the Himalayas which became his spiritual home. Early tendencies of this are visible in his famous picture. "To Whom shall we offer our Sacrifices", an illustration on the famous Vedic Hymn depicting a primitive worshipper offering burnt offerings to a huge monolith tipped by the golden rays of the rising sun. The semi-draped figure of the young man with outstretched arms kneeling before a burning fire, is symbolic of the spirit of man himself, bewildered and overwhelmed by the mystery of the universe and life in search of his God. Religion offers certain explanations of the great mystery, though they are far from convincing. Science tries to illumine some facets of the Unknown and the Unseen, but we are still bewildered; the great Unknown is still a mystery to us, and we still ask "To whom shall we make our offerings ?". This important picture not only marks an important stage in the development of the art of Bireswar Sen, but is also an index of his rational mind.

Of the Hindu artists, he is perhaps the only one who has successfully resisted the lure of romanticism and mythology. Though he is a rationalist, his pictures possess a mystical air, and convey sentiments of a true lover of nature. In Bireswar Sen, India has found the finest interpreter of the grandeur, mystery, and beauty of her Himalayan mountains. He has paid homage to the sublime peaks, awesome gorges, and thundering rivers of the Himalayas in countless landscapes. His love and devotion for the Himalayas is the secret of his success as a mountain painter. As he says, "I am still a primitive man offering oblations to the undying spirit of the everlasting hills."

HIS MINIATURE LANDSCAPES

On account of his fine line work and perfect colour sense, Bireswar has excelled in painting the Himalayan landscapes. We have seen how human figures gradually become smaller and smaller in his

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pictures till they become merely symbols. His microscopic shepherds, horsemen, village women, cattle, goats, and horses, painted against the background of grand and awe inspiring rocks and mountains, impress upon us the comparative insignificance of man against the wild forces of nature. By a gentle stroke of brush, he creates a woman carrying a pitcher, a shepherd smoking a pipe, a Sadhu draped in saffron, which could only be discerned by a magnifying glass. People often wonder if he uses a lens for painting his miniature humanity and animals. It was only when he started the innovation of miniature landscapes, which have become so popular that he really came to his own. A large collection of these miniatures can be seen in the Mysore State Collection, Sri Chitralayam Travancore and with scores of private collectors.

We find him at his best in these miniature landscapes which, on account of their democratic prices, are found in many middle class homes in India. Some people say that these are too small to be framed, and cannot be used for decoration and are hence of limited utility. In ancient India, pictures were seldom hung in rooms and were carefully kept in books ceremoniously wrapped in pieces of cloth, and were taken out and displayed only on special occasions. As they were seen after long intervals, their artistic appeal was far greater compared with pictures hung on the wall which lose their charm as they are constantly seen. In their '*bastas*' these pictures were shielded from light, and they retained their bright colours for a much longer period. It is this tradition of the '*basta*', which Bireswar has revived; and his miniature landscapes are not meant for display on the walls, but are to be seen at rare intervals.

These miniature landscapes of Bireswar are little gems. In small space so much is compressed without creating an impression of crowding. We see Tibetan Chortens, prayer-flags, and lonely Lamas resting on weird crags. We see blazing flames, and twinkling stars, and ghost-like figures of hermits and hill men. We see grey blue mountains, and white glaciers contrasting with brilliant yellow, light blue, and green skies. We see the morning mist lighted by the rays of the rising sun, and fleecy white cumulus clouds, floating over the tops of the mountains casting fleeting shadows over red rocks. In these miniatures, he has successfully caught the evanascent moods of nature—passing showers, sunset gleams, which appear for a moment to vanish for ever, shimmering sunlight on rusting foliage, clouds that form and reform in all sorts of fantastic shapes, and the approach of heavy rain clouds of the Indian monsoon.

M. S. Randhawa

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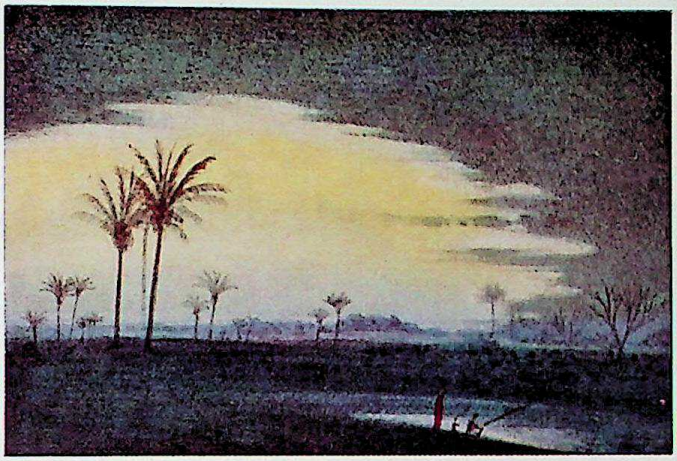

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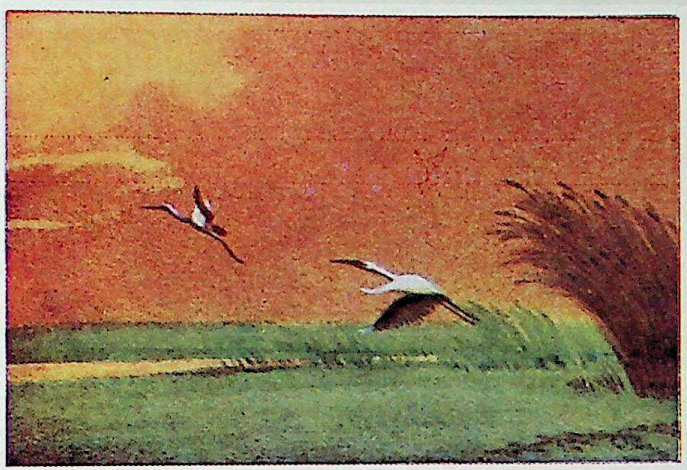

HERON - LAND

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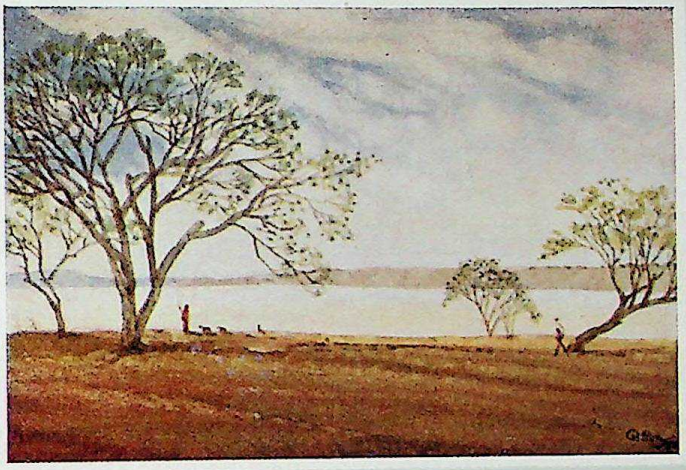

SARJU

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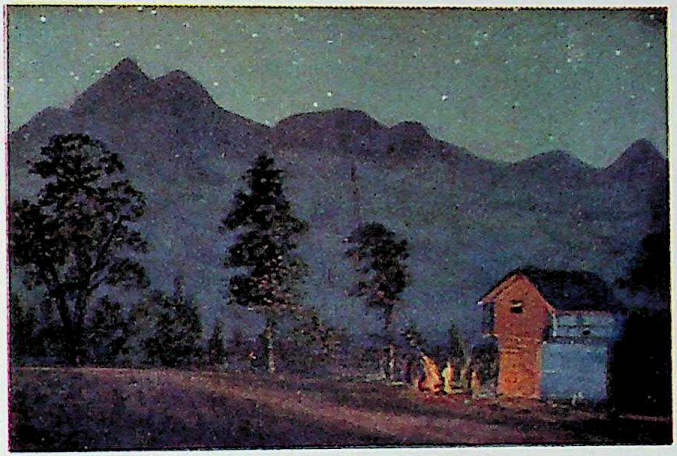

STAR - LIGHT

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WINTER

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AUTUMN

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MORNING MIST

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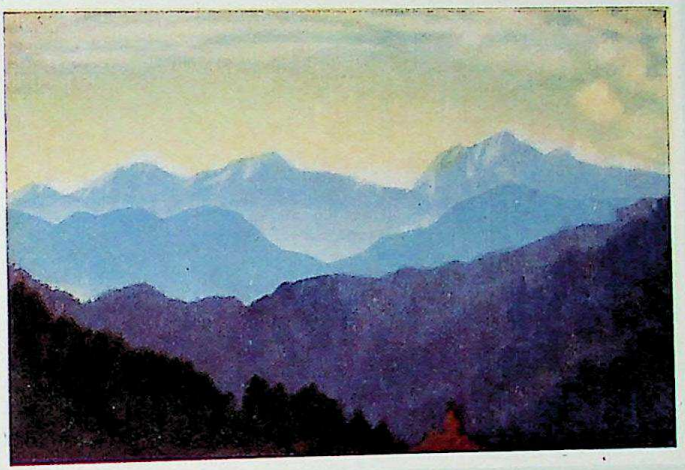

PURPLE AND BLUE

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ADORATION

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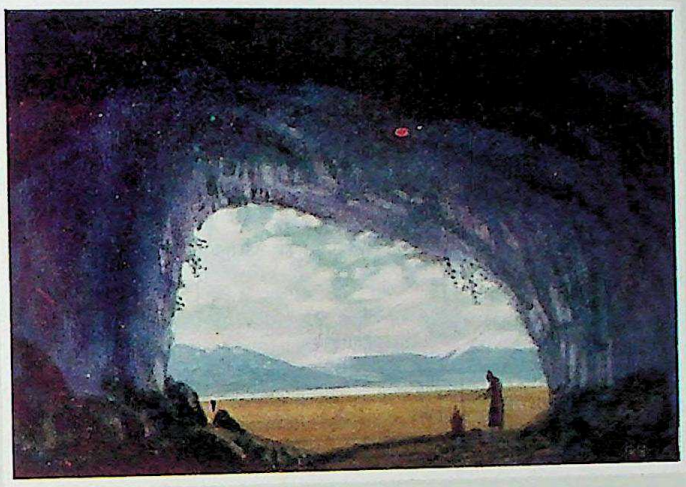

THE SAINT'S BLESSING

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MONASTERY

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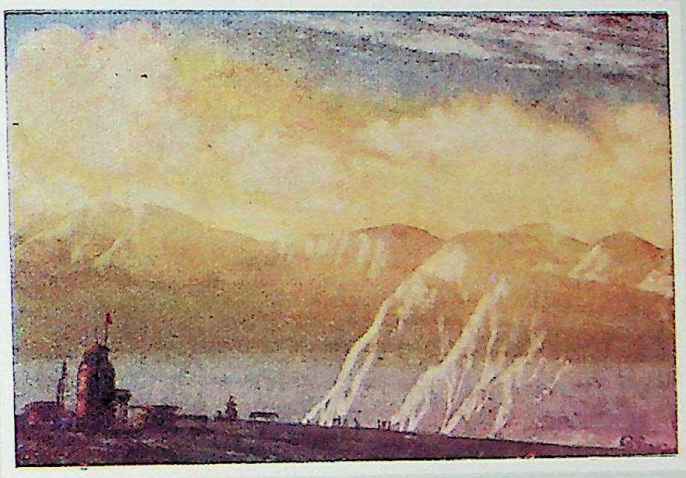

GOLDEN HAZ

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THRONE OF EAGLE KINGS

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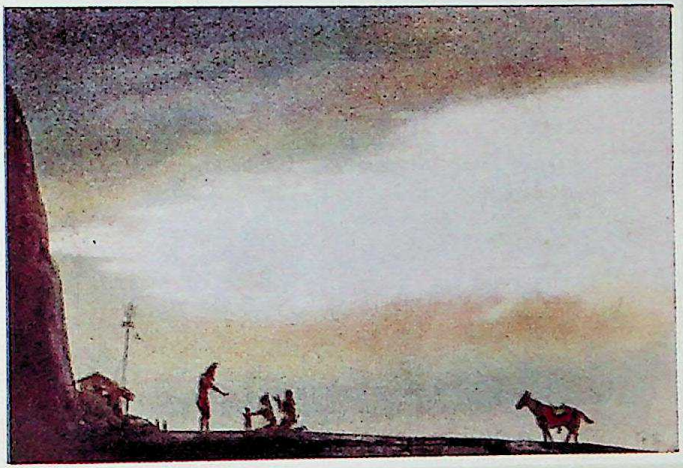

ON A PASS

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VIRGIN SNOWS

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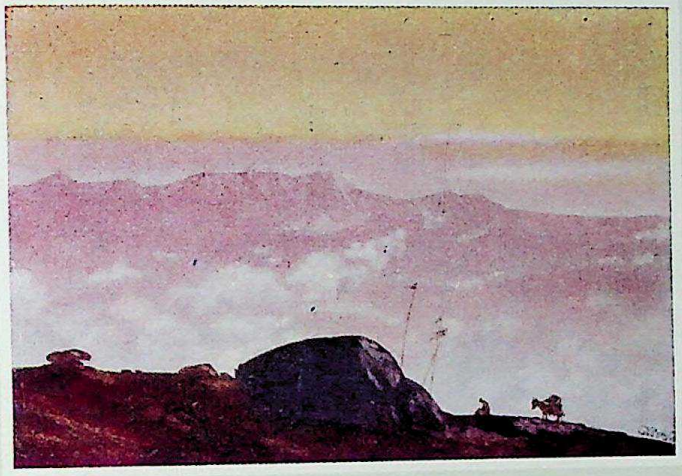

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